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DEL MAR FAIRGROUNDS SHELTER COUNTY'S LARGER FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS

Note to editor: During the California wildfires new and innovative disaster pet plans were set into motion. This story highlights one such plan.

PASADENA, Calif. — They did not show up two-by-two, but for many of San Diego's four-legged creatures – and a sizable number of its two-legged ones as well – the Del Mar Fairgrounds was a refuge worthy of Noah against the firestorm that engulfed parts of Southern California last month. It was the first time that Del Mar Fairgrounds had become an evacuation center for people as well as animals.

More than 2,700 large animals – mostly horses, but also a sprinkling of donkeys, zebras, llamas and goats – jammed the 400-acre grounds, filling the horse park and main stables (approximately 2,500 stalls) to more than capacity (more than 220 horses are boarded there regularly).

Add several hundred human beings to the mix – and their smaller pets – the employees of the California Department of Food and Agriculture's 22nd District Agricultural Association (of which Del Mar is part) had their work cut out for them.

It was a scene repeated at other designated large-animal evacuation centers near the burn areas, such as the San Diego Polo Club, Lakeside Rodeo, Westfield Park Plaza, the Oaks/Blenheim Exhibition Center and the Orange County Fairgrounds in Irvine. These evacuation centers opened in the wake of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's State of Emergency proclamation on Oct. 21.

The swift action drew praise from animal rights groups.

"It appears that ...government in affected areas was able to meet the needs of these communities, and that's to be commended," said Matthew Herlocker of United Animal Nations.

San Diegans are crazy about horses, with nearly 300,000 of the animals registered in the county. So when the fires began, it didn't take long for horse lovers to turn to Del Mar, home of one of the nation's fabled racetracks and a designated county shelter for large animals.

"People started showing up with their animals in the middle of the night Sunday (October 21)," recalled Fairgrounds spokeswoman Kina Paegert, adding the scene was far more organized this time than during the Cedar Fire, nearly four years earlier to the day. Back then, Paegert said that many animals escaped from their home stalls and fled as the flames approached and had to be

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rounded up. This time, animal owners and their neighbors had time to deliver their charges to the shelter for safety.

Over the animals' weeklong stay, volunteers fed them 1,300 bales of hay-based feed and made them comfortable by lining Del Mar's stalls with 5,000 bales of shavings. Veterinarians provided checkups, while the racetrack posted pictures on its website of a few equine guests whose owners could not be immediately identified.

Many of the animals' owners were able to take up temporary lodging next to their horses in the racetrack's jockey quarters. In the end, 2,000 cots and 2,500 pillows and blankets were rounded up to help make 2,200 fire refugees comfortable.

With Del Mar the scene of many county special events, there was already a good deal of food on the premises. The fairgrounds' food and beverage partner threw open its pantries. With the help of local grocery stores, fairground employees – many of whom were under evacuation orders themselves – served nearly 10,000 warm meals. Volunteers, including Marines from nearby Camp Pendleton, helped operate the shelter and take donations. The National Guard, meanwhile, assisted with safety and security issues.

All in all, Paegert said the emergency was a real test of the district's mettle, but one that Del Mar, with help from the community and government, passed with flying colors.

Note to editor: This picture, in hi-res color, is available upon request, by calling the FEMA news desk at 626-431-3178

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